

KIBBUTZ AIN HAROD FACES UP TO PRAGUE

Report from the Israeli Grass Roots

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THE Prague trial meant the "day of disillusion" for most of the adherents of Mapam in the Ain Harod settlement—so much so that the later news from Moscow of the arrest of the Jewish physicians came as something of an anticlimax, and was accepted almost resignedly by the *haverim*, who were now ready to expect the worst. Yet, much as these Mapamniks had been shocked by "Prague" and "Moscow," few of them realized that this was but the beginning of a long, painful process that could have no other outcome than to deprive them of many of their most cherished political convictions.

Why did these Mapam supporters, staunch fellow-travelers of Stalinist Communism who had swallowed many a camel in the past, gag at this particular one? Because, of course, they were also Jews and Zionists, and because Mordecai Oren was one of their very own, and one of their leaders besides. In many ways these *haverim*

felt like any fellow-traveler, or Communist, when at the breaking point; but in other ways their reactions were quite special. What some of the circumstances were that made for this should already be familiar to readers of COMMENTARY who pondered Mark Alexander's article, "Israel's Communists and Fellow-Travelers," in last August's number, and learned how very closely the Mapam party hewed to the Communist, or Cominform, line. But there were still other factors that affected the Mapam *haverim* in Ain Harod.

AIN HAROD is the oldest, richest, and largest settlement in the Valley of Jezreel. It is the founder member of Kibbutz Hameuhad, which is a federation of sixty-odd settlements that took on the prerogatives of a state during the days of the Mandate, and which has not, since then, been eager to surrender these to the newer and larger State of Israel. Each *meshek* (individual settlement) of the kibbutz is something of a closed society, a self-contained economic, administrative, and residential unit, with its own land, livestock, inventory, and machinery, its own communal buildings, schools, kindergartens, and children's homes. The *meshek* also owns the houses its members live in, and their furniture—virtually everything except the clothes on their backs. Kibbutz Hameuhad runs its own system of schools, which all children attend up to eighteen, as well as higher educational institutions that give half-year courses in kibbutz management, both political and social, ideology (euphemistically called "*humanistika*"), and pedagogy. Those sons and daughters of the *meshek* who are sent off to study at the University or Technical College have their ways paid without exception

THE Israeli reaction to Soviet anti-Semitism and Russia's breaking of diplomatic relations has been aired most openly in the Knesset and the press, but the deeper tremors of public opinion under the impact of these events have had to be listened for elsewhere. ALEPH V. SHERMAN has put his ear, almost literally, to the grass roots in Israel, and he has heard a murmur swell into a roar—at least among those in the kibbutzim who still maintained ties of sentiment and political conviction with the "great Russian experiment." Mr. Sherman is an experienced political reporter who was the London *Observer's* correspondent in 1950 and 1951 in Yugoslavia. He has also broadcast for the BBC. Born in London and receiving his higher education at the London School of Economics, he is now thirty-four, and since February 1952 has been living in Israel, where he is connected with the *Jerusalem Post*.

—there being virtually no scholarships in Israel—by the kibbutz. The latter runs a publishing house of its own, too, that puts out books of fiction and non-fiction, as well as periodicals; and it cooperates with other sections of Mapam in issuing the Israel-wide daily, *Al Hamishmar*. In addition to all this, Kibbutz Hameuhad owns factories, large by Israeli standards, in various of its *meshakim*, and operates a good-sized construction business, where, as in the case of the factories, outside labor is employed as well as kibbutz members.

MOST settlers do not leave the *meshek* for months on end. They do not receive enough pocket money for stays in town, and in any case, relatives apart, they have very little to attract them outside the *meshek*. True, the more politically active members travel on Mapam or kibbutz business, but they are the ones least likely to be corrupted by contact with the world outside. For the rest, Kibbutz Hameuhad runs its own movie shows, lectures, and concerts right in the *meshakim*, and provides their inhabitants with most of their reading matter.

As might be expected, most of the Mapamnicks at Ain Harod have not known enough about world politics to be able to form a serious opinion about Stalinist Communism. In conversations I discovered again and again that they had nothing to say beyond what they had read in *Al Hamishmar*. And this held true even when it came to the problems of Israel herself, where they likewise contented themselves with the relatively small amount of information to be gleaned from the very partisan Mapam newspaper. What they did know was that the moral and social development of the country has not been what they had hoped, but they attributed most of the corruption and nepotism in Israel, the low productivity, and the fall in standards of living, to the Ben Gurion government's policy of "class collaboration." Yet, for all that, their own approach to any specific domestic problems has never differed enough from Mapai's to

warrant the violence of their hatred for that party.

However, differences over questions of national and international policy have become entangled with disputes over the future of the kibbutz movement itself, which has been undergoing something of a crisis since the founding of the state. This is perhaps the most important emotional factor in the bitterness the Mapamnicks feel toward Mapai, and also explains their passionate identification with those faraway countries behind the Iron Curtain of whose doings they really know so little. The creation of the state has encouraged other than communal forms of land colonization, especially *moshavim*, which are cooperative settlements of farmers with individual holdings; these, in the eyes of the kibbutzim, are competitors for the limited resources of capital, housing, manpower, and prestige at the new state's command. And the kibbutzim have been put further on the defensive by their failure to grow as fast as the total population of the country.

Nor is this all. Founded in hardship and austerity, the kibbutzim have within a generation become rich and successful. One group of *haverim* see a double threat to the purity of the kibbutz movement: from the "profane" world outside, and from those inside who put comfort and consolidation before further expansion and pioneering. Many of the veterans, now in their fifties, hanker after more ease and family life; the old, original impetus of communal life has slackened. During the past few years housing conditions have improved a great deal; instead of the tent or wooden hut, the original emblems of kibbutz life, the norm is now set by the one-and-a-half-room dwelling with toilet and shower under the same roof (instead of twenty-five yards away over a muddy path), built of stone or put together from one of the excellent pre-fabs imported from Sweden or Finland. Yet, despite the speed with which new dwellings are being built, only a minority have been able to attain this "norm"; for the rest, the very existence of the new housing only makes their

present single rooms in huts that much the more irksome.

Time and time again I felt I was seeing the drama of Eve and the apple acted out, or of the noble savage corrupted by civilization. It is the same problem with furniture: "It's about time we had new furniture," the *haverim* told me, apologizing for what they now had. Such an attitude would have been unthinkable a few years ago. All this offers the material basis for social and group tensions—though the Mapam ideologues, so fond of offering materialist interpretations of other people's behavior, refuse to admit the possibility that these might apply to themselves too.

ON THE whole those who favor relaxation of the fierce and Spartan collectivism of kibbutz life—dating from the original days of pioneering, danger, and youth, all three of which are now tending to become idealized as ultimate values in themselves—have in the main become Mapainiks. Those who oppose relaxation, who feel that the ideals of their youth must be upheld at all cost, find their way to Mapam, with its general revolutionary conservatism.

I cannot help thinking of German-born Havera J. in the kitchen, a plump, friendly *havera* in her forties, nothing very fanatical about her, not very knowledgeable as far as East European or any other kind of politics is concerned. Why did she support Mapam against Mapai? Because, she explained, Mapai were not at all real kibbutzniks, they wanted comfort rather than development. Did she not want comfort, too, I used to ask, did she want to live always like a twenty-year-old? Everybody wanted comfort, she admitted, but you had to fight against it in order to save the movement from corruption. As for the age problem—people were as old as they felt, only in the cities did they lose their youth so quickly.

What did Havera J. think about the "world struggle"? She said that "we" were for the "revolutionary world" against the "capitalist world" that wanted to destroy it. The "revolutionary world" she pictured as

a kibbutz writ large, and the capitalists who wanted to destroy it were the same as those who wanted to break up her kibbutz and leave her again as lost and homeless as she had been right after Hitler came to power.

For many Ain Harod people, to admit the need for change in kibbutz conditions meant admitting they were no longer young; the guilt they felt at their own desires for comfort—desires that might begin the disintegration of the whole kibbutz—made them all the bitterer at those who openly confessed to such desires. The intensity of their feeling for the kibbutz, and their refusal to let their "leftist" faith be tampered with (after all, theirs was the revolution to end revolutions), gave the identification of these Mapamniks with the East much of its emotional force.

FOR a long time Kibbutz Hameuhad had prided itself on being nonpartisan politically. Of course, it was Labor Zionist in general, but it refused to commit itself definitely to either Mapai or Mapam, though its members, as individuals, adhered more or less to one or the other party, with a slight majority in favor of Mapam. But in recent years, since the establishment of the state, political friction had grown inside the kibbutz, reaching the point two years or so back where a number of *meshakim* that had Mapai majorities split off from the Kibbutz Hameuhad and affiliated themselves with other kibbutz federations, with the *haverim* in the Mapam minorities in these settlements moving out and going to live in Mapam-majority *meshakim*.

Ain Harod, however, was one of the few *meshakim* in which there was no clear majority on either side (actually Mapai slightly outnumbered Mapam there), with the result that both sides stayed *in situ*. The agricultural council of the Histadrut, accepted by both sides as arbiter, decided that the *meshek* should be divided into two separate settlements except for one or two communal buildings used in common; Mapai, however, was to retain the greater part of the central residential and administrative area.

Kibbutz Hameuhad refused to accept this last, claiming their right to the central area on sentimental grounds. Mapai, for their part, refused to acquiesce in any modification of the Histadrut decision lest their direct communication with the neighboring Mapai *meshek* of Tel Yosef be cut off. This difference has delayed so far the actual physical division of Ain Harod, with the dividing up of housing accommodations frozen until a final decision—which looks as far away as ever—is reached. Meanwhile, two more or less closed societies continue living side by side in the settlement, with considerable tension developing—fist fights on two occasions, and free-for-alls over disputed property like living quarters and the printing press.

IT WAS in the midst of this feud that news of "Prague" burst in upon Ain Harod—a feud that many leading *haverim* in the *meshek* chose to see as a struggle between "two worlds"—that of revolution and that of reaction—and which required, therefore, that little things like broken arms and destroyed furniture be looked at in the light of the "whole world struggle."

The Ain Harod Mapamniks reacted to Prague without waiting for a lead from party headquarters. But not on the first day: the conflicts, the passions, and the feverish sectarianism of the recent past had left them too unprepared. They were numbed on the first morning, and expressed disbelief: "It can't be true! There must be some awful mistake! It will all be explained." But in a few hours their mood began to change.

"How could the Peoples' Democracies do this to us," one *haver* asked, "after all the solidarity we've shown?"

"They are wrong to attack the Zionist movement as a whole," was the consensus. "We are all right. Let them attack anybody else they like, but not us. Oren can't be a spy, we know him personally, he's one of us, an attack on him is an attack on us."

All through the evening groups of *haverim* went on discussing the news. You could see their minds working: was this or was it

not anti-Semitism? Some said it was, others denied it, while admitting, however, that it came dangerously near to being something that would cause anti-Semitism. The Ain Harod people were too much old connoisseurs of anti-Semitism, having experienced it in almost every part of the world, to be able to still their discomfort.

At first, when I tried to pin them down on the question of Slansky's guilt, they refused to take a definite stand. Few of them, however, were prepared to rule out as far-fetched the story about his being an American agent, nor did I get the feeling, in the course of dozens of conversations, that any of the *haverim* balked at accepting the Prague trial because of its utter incredibility. This was not surprising; anyone prepared to balk on those grounds would have already done so long ago in connection with previous Stalinist trials. On the other hand, I began to notice that later on in the week comrades who had rejected "Prague" because they felt it as a direct attack on themselves now began to show skepticism about the trial as a whole, and even to admit that the "trial system" itself might be open to doubt.

THE *haverim* did their best in any case to bring the whole thing into some kind of order in their minds; and, after a few days, their reactions could be classified under three main groups. Most important, I think, were those who reacted like Haver Aryeh—important, in the first place, because they represented the rising generation of activists who would soon take over from the now aging original leadership. Aryeh had joined the "world revolutionary" movement when it was no longer in its "romantic period" and had already accepted brutality and "double-think" as the necessary concomitants of the whole present "transitional" period. Aryeh was energetic, a capable organizer, tireless, devoted. He came from a well-to-do family, and his ardor was not deflected by hunger for material goods. For him, the question of the truth or falsity of the allegations made at the Prague trial was not an important one.

He expressed himself as follows: "If Slansky and Company were leading Czech policy in a wrong direction, and in the end against the interests of the Czech people and the world revolution, then the trial would be justifiable even if the evidence were not true; for it would be easier to convince the masses that Slansky was a traitor than to go into complicated arguments over policies on which there might be more than one opinion. In the same way, if we have to expel Sneh [the leader of the most staunchly pro-Soviet, anti-Zionist wing of Mapam] for being an enemy of the Zionist movement and going against majority decisions, then we should be quite justified in showing that he was a traitor of long standing and a foreign agent rather than arguing detailed points of policy that might confuse some of the younger comrades and lead them to take his side. Some people in America, no doubt, would altogether misunderstand our trial because it would seem far-fetched to them, and they would think Sneh innocent. But in fact he would really be guilty, whether he was a conscious agent or not."

As far as Aryeh was concerned, many or even most of the charges made at Prague against the Ben Gurion government might be right, for Mapai had indeed been Anglo-American agents for many years; they had abused the hospitality and help given their representatives by the satellite governments at the end of the war, and they were wrong in taking sides in the cold war—"See how the Arabs stayed neutral and got more than we did. We too would get more if we did the same." For all these reasons the question of Slansky's guilt as such did not matter much to Aryeh. Yet he opposed "Prague" with his whole heart, because it had attacked Mapam, his kibbutz movement, and the Jews; he felt it as a direct personal challenge to himself.

BUT what about his revolutionary world? He had been taught for a long time now that only shaky and anti-social regimes had to resort to anti-Semitism. Aryeh's an-

swer was a defense of himself rather than of the Soviet world: "We never said that the Jews had a future in Eastern Europe. We'd always said that the only place for a Jew was in Israel, so this doesn't surprise us." This was not exactly true, however; the Mapam had made the well-being of the Jews under Communism one of their main talking points in Stalin's favor. But, still, the fact that they now resorted so quickly to this argument, and found it so satisfying, seemed to me a sign of the change of heart they were beginning to undergo.

For the rest, Aryeh, like the majority of the *haverim*, now tended, if anything, to overstress his loyalty to the "revolutionary world." He was anxious to show that "Prague" would not change him in this respect, either by making him disloyal to the "camp of progress" or by convincing him that he had been wrong all along and the "anti-social philistines" right. However, the more he and his companions trumpeted about their unshakable loyalty to the "world of revolution," the more audible became the first quakings of their consciences—and the more strongly was I reminded of how Tito's Communists in Yugoslavia, several years back, had tried to assimilate the first shock of the Cominform resolution against them. Their identification, too, had been strained, and they had tried to fight back at first without surrendering that sense of belonging to the "revolutionary world" without which they would feel so naked and alone. In Yugoslavia, too, for more than a year after the Cominform "resolution" of June 1948, the comrades used to assure me, in all sincerity, of their faithfulness to the Soviet world, while Tito went out of his way to make even more bitter attacks than ever on the Western powers and on anti-Soviet trends at home in Yugoslavia—as if to convince, if not others, then at least himself that nothing had changed.

During the next days at Ain Harod many parallels with Yugoslavia forced themselves upon me. Once again I witnessed the impact of Soviet hostility on an organized society for which pro-Sovietism had previously

played a role in many ways like that of religion, and where through all present discontent, reverses, and imperfections, a land of promise and rightness had shone into which the *haverim* could project all dreams of the future perfect society they planned for themselves.

THE second category of reactions differed in emphasis. Aharon, an old-timer and ideologue, said: "We never gave blind adherence to the Soviet Union. What we said, and still say, is that it represents progress in spite of any weaknesses it shows and therefore deserves our general support."

But suppose the USSR commits one unprogressive act after another—I asked—would not a time come when Aharon would have to revise his whole notion of the USSR's inherently progressive character? He seemed to be taken aback by this, and took time to think before answering. He was one of the few Mapam comrades who read Western publications; and, belonging to the pre-1914 generation, he had retained a little more intellectual curiosity than had the Bolshevized "1917" generation, whose members wielded most of the power in Mapam.

"In that eventuality we would, I suppose, have to reconsider our views," he admitted wistfully. The idea had never struck him before; after all, who wanted to have to reconsider his views after a lifetime of struggle? When he talked again, after "Moscow," he had not moved much further, except for a new sense of Israel's partial, and unwelcome, isolation. The world was divided into two camps, as he saw it, both hostile to Israel, yet Israel remained sympathetic to the Soviet camp—"though we must try to picture the whole world struggle objectively." The Communist camp seemed no longer so bright, nor the other camp so dark, as two months before. Again I was reminded of Tito's policy statements during 1949.

The third kind of reaction may be characterized as less articulate and less coherent, but it was a frequent one and expressed that current of feeling on which the more articulate formulations of Kibbutz Hameu-

had's policies will be based for a long time to come. It was a feeling of disgust, of disillusionment: "Dreyfus Case"; "We are the only decent people, no one else is any good"; "We have wasted our time trying to win the friendship of the Russians"; "They are all the same"; "This is just like czarist times." These were the expressions of the *havrei hameshek*, the man-in-the-street of kibbutz life. With his mood moving in this direction, the leaders of Kibbutz Hameuhad had no alternative but to press Mapam—a third of whose entire membership resides in Kibbutz Hameuhad—to reject "Prague."

Together with despair and disappointment came a measure of resentment. *Haverim* began denouncing the Communists. "They ought to be banned!" declared one veteran. "After all, our supporters are illegal in Eastern Europe." Dr. Moshe Sneh, leader of the pro-Communist wing of Mapam, who continued to accept "Prague," became the object of an inordinate amount of hatred because he, for one, went on repeating what all the *haverim* had firmly believed only a little while earlier. Almost overnight he was converted into Mapam's new devil, their "Jew." He ought to be expelled from Mapam, everyone agreed and publicly denounced as a traitor to the Jewish people. Sneh now served as the *kapparah* for the comrade's own sins, for all the silly praises of Communist policy towards Jews they had sung in the past; all the hatred and bitterness that they would have liked to vent directly on Prague and Moscow were sent there through Sneh as a kind of forwarding agent.

On the very first day of the trial I had asked a *haver*, "Well, how are you going to take this?" His answer was, "We never were on good terms with Sneh's group, now there'll be a showdown." A younger *haver* commented later in the month, "If we stand firm, then Hashomer Hatzair will have to fight Sneh and kick him out." With each week, Sneh's role as a diversionary target grew in importance. But can the comrades go on denouncing him without a conscious revision of their own over-all position?

Sneh and the Communists were not the only recipients of the *haverim*'s hatred and resentment; Mapai also came in for its share, and being closer to hand than either the "camp of progress" or Sneh's faction, it had in the end to absorb, literally and symbolically, a good deal of the Mapamnik's otherwise frustrated rage. One result was the second "Battle of Ain Harod," which took place a fortnight after Prague, and scandalized most of Israel.

Two rooms, in good stone bungalows in Ain Harod, hitherto occupied by "*parve*" residents—that is, neither Mapai nor Mapam—fell vacant. Mapam agreed that one, which had belonged to a *parve* school-teacher, should go to another *parve* school-teacher who taught at both parties' schools—though mainly at the Mapai one—and needed better accommodations. He had begun to move into the bungalow with his family and furniture when Mapam suddenly reconsidered—deciding either that they didn't approve of the teacher, or that Mapai had been getting away with too much—and that, in any case, it was time to make a demonstration of militancy. (I stress the uncertainty of Mapam's declared motivation advisedly. Those of its leading spirits with whom I discussed the issue at the time defended themselves on the ground that the incident had to be seen in its right perspective as part of the "world struggle," and should not be taken "legalistically" out of context.)

Earlier in the week there had already been an incident. Mapam had defied the Histadrut ban on new building in the central area of Ain Harod by setting up two tents on a concrete base, which Mapai had then demolished. Now Mapam sent out "battle squads" to prevent the teacher from moving the rest of his furniture into his new quarters. The Mapamniks attacked without warning. A free-for-all ensued, the teacher's furniture was smashed, so were his doors and windows; chair-legs and staves were wielded, blood flowed freely, and a couple of elderly *haverim* had had heart at-

tacks by the time the police arrived—in car-loads—to restore order. Mapam, intent on a victory for the "camp of progress" that would compensate for its figurative disgrace at Prague, had even sent into battle against the teacher seventeen- and eighteen-year-old boys who sat in his own classes.

Mapam's behavior was understandable: as long as they were mocked for their pro-Sovietism by ignorant "bourgeois philistines," they could shrug it off. But when Mapai, too, could say "I told you so," rubbing it in with more energy than decorum, adding their sneers to the blows of an all too hostile fate—then it became unbearable. Again, it was reminiscent of the way the Titoites had begun to hit out harder than ever at their anti-Soviet critics when they felt their self-assurance slipping, in the effort to keep up their courage and convince themselves that they were not traitors. Much of what the Mapam people had to go through was unavoidable, but it was a shame that Mapai did not have enough maturity to try to help them in their straits instead of just mocking.

THE reactions of the Ain Harod Mapamniks and of neighboring Kibbutz Hameuhad settlers to Prague and Moscow were not always the same as those of other sections of Mapam—or those of the Communists either. Mapam split over the trials, one section moving closer to the Communists and deciding to stand firm behind Stalin, come what would, whereas the majority of Hashomer Hatzair in Kibbutz Artzi (which was 100 per cent Mapam) moved toward an anti-Prague position rather slowly and only under the pressure of Kibbutz Hameuhad (which was mostly Ahudat Avoda). But it was the urban Mapamniks on the whole who provided the pro-Prague elements—and the Communists in Israel are likewise mostly urban.

These differences in reaction to Prague and Moscow may be explained to some extent in terms of the different centers of loyalty of the parties involved. For the people of Ain Harod, the kibbutz was the center

of life, and their attitudes towards Mapai, Moscow, and all other phenomena flowed from this loyalty. However important these attitudes might become, the reality of the *meshek* appears to have been strong enough to continue to dominate them. In the case of the Communists and an important section of the urban Mapamnicks, however, identification with the Soviet Union, whatever its original motivation, had grown in time to become the central and decisive one, strong enough to outweigh the motives that had brought it into being in the first place—their original hatred of imperialism, and of poverty, their hopes of social progress—motives with which their loyalty to the USSR was now in open conflict. . . .

Yet it remains that the majority of Mapam, like the Mapam members at Ain Harod, have taken their first steps on a path that will lead inevitably to a complete break with Stalinist Communism, and will face them also with a painful task of readjustment. They have had to jump from the 1930's to the 1950's in a matter of months. Whether Mapai can offer them enough positive values to help ease the process of this readjustment, and replace one set of functional beliefs by another, more valid one, remains to be seen, but it will require far more on Mapai's part than mere exposure of Communist sins and crimes.

POSTSCRIPT. The news of the Soviet Union's severance of diplomatic relations with Israel caught the Mapam *haverim* in Ain Harod just as unprepared as Prague did. And again they tried in various ways to explain to themselves an event in the face of which all their old convictions and loyalties left them unarmed. Some insisted that the

bombing of the Soviet legation in Tel Aviv had been the result of provocation by the Communists themselves, and they demanded the banning of Israel's Communist party (Maki). Further, they accused the Russians of having deserted true revolutionary principles; it was themselves, the Mapamnicks, not the Soviets, who were now the real socialists and revolutionaries.

Nevertheless—and again we see how difficult it is for the adherents of a fanatical creed to let go of their old ideas even though they fly in the face of reality—all the Mapam people at Ain Harod voiced their support for their party's official line, according to which the Israeli government itself was largely to blame for the rupture of relations—because it could have prevented the bombing, because it had provoked Russia by abandoning neutrality and taking the West's side in the cold war, and because it had perverted Zionism into anti-Communism. If Mapam had controlled the government instead of Mapai, echoed the *haverim*, Israel and Russia would still be friends. Yet at the same time they approved of their party's stand in disassociating itself from Sneh's and Maki's line of unreserved support for the Soviet regime.

The comrades seemed half aware of the ambiguity of their position; or, at least, they were far from comfortable about it. The rationalizations, official and otherwise, of their refusal to take an outright anti-Soviet stand do not seem to be able to halt the "decomposition" of their revolutionary faith that is now on its inexorable way. If only someone, they felt, would discover or formulate the true Zionist and revolutionary answer to such unforeseen situations. . . .

I could only sympathize.